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It May Be Easy Going Green

By Congresswoman Doris O. Matsui, California's 5th Congressional District

During the 110th Congress, the new Democratic majority has made reforming our energy policy a top priority. Unfortunately, this goal has been stymied by the President's continued veto threats of the bills we have crafted. Despite this stonewalling, the fact remains that the world we live in is rapidly changing, with nature succumbing to the effects of global warming.

Over the past few years, we have been remiss and negligent in our respect for our planet. However, we can harness the innovative spirit of the American people and reverse the impact that our actions have caused. As our international partners are lining up to bring about the change that will protect our planet, it is imperative that the United States diligently plays its part. Our great nation has a long history of leading the way to a better future; now is the time to honor that tradition and hold ourselves accountable for reducing our environmental impact.

By employing a wider range of ingenious approaches, we can and must reduce our Nation's dependence on foreign oil, stabilize our energy grid, and improve air quality in our communities. Each one of these initiatives will play a central role in handing over a cleaner planet to future generations.

It is clear that we must institute a multi-faceted approach to address climate change and protect our environment. Only an overhaul of everyday practices, in combination with improved federal and state emission standards, will serve our goal. In my home state of California, we have shown a commitment to leading this transition, and my own hometown of Sacramento has exhibited a hearty commitment to being the Greenest City in America. Sacramento was recently named a Solar America City for its efforts to make the shift toward solar power, and it was the center of the action when California became the first state to cap its emissions voluntarily by passing the Global Warming Solutions Act (AB 32).

Garnering knowledge from the proven tactics undertaken in California, I believe that certain initiatives can be translated to the federal level and achieve similar results. Last week, I introduced the Energy Conservation through Trees Act, a bill that expands upon local initiatives to utilize strategically-placed trees to reduce the energy needed to heat and cool American homes.

Trees planted in targeted locations shield homes from the wind during the winter, while providing hours of constant, cooling shade during the warmer summer months. Strategically-planted trees can save American families significant amounts of money on their utility bills. At the same time, these trees dramatically reduce the amount of energy required to maintain desired home temperatures.

It takes only ten trees to save the energy required to do the work of a residential air conditioner, potentially saving consumers from 25 to 40 percent on their monthly electric bills.

As economic concerns continue to haunt hard-working American families, we must take into account how all of our domestic priorities intertwine. The fabric of our society is complex, but the fundamentals are simple: spurring progress in the elements of our nation that form its core yields results that ripple through every aspect of our lives. We can use the ingenuity and inventiveness of the American people to help craft an energy strategy for the 21st century.

Investing in energy efficiency will reduce the burden of heating costs and lessen the impact of the rising price of oil on American families. And, as we see no end in sight to the rapidly escalating prices of gasoline, this relief cannot come a moment too soon.

Increasing the amount of trees in our communities will help sequester particulate matter that is linked to respiratory illness and cancer... illnesses that strain our health care system and family budgets alike.

Reducing the tax breaks for big oil companies and injecting those resources into renewable energy technologies will cultivate a green workforce, and generate good jobs for hard-working Americans.

These steps, when woven together, will culminate in the widespread change that is so desperately needed. They are an example of the direction our energy policy, when carefully crafted, can take us.

As we face unprecedented population growth and development, we must take action now to ensure that we can handle the strain this progress will place on our environment. Federal research shows that carefully-planted trees can lower summertime temperatures in urban areas, reduce air-conditioning bills, and trap the greenhouse gasses responsible for global warming.

Yet the implementation of this process is limited to a handful of cities. The decline in tree cover has been steadily climbing since the 1970s in direct correlation with cities' growth. With city and state budgets straining at the seams, the resources are not available to expand these programs without Federal involvement.

Planting more trees in urban areas is a savvy investment to combat global warming in our most populous areas. In Sacramento, we have a tree-planting program that has flourished over the course of the last 16 years. It easily pays for itself, as the energy savings in the summertime months far exceed the cost of planting new trees. Combined with appliance efficiency incentives, rigorous but achievable emissions rules, and investment in the "green" workforce, these strategies can lead the way toward a cleaner and more sustainable future.

In order to implement wide-ranging reform of our national energy policy, it is clear that we must employ a multivariate approach to addressing the energy crisis facing the world today. Responsible action that we undertake today will lay the groundwork for a cleaner planet to be handed over to the next generation of Americans.